

Spoken Scripture: Insights Gained by Reading Mark and the Qur'an in
Tandem Through an Oral Lens

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Religion in the
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The field of orality studies has provided new perspectives and insights on a vast array of literature, including the Gospel of Mark and the Qur'an. Despite numerous historical and literary parallels between these two works, the enriched perspectives gained by orality studies have not often been brought to bear upon one another. This thesis brings Mark and the Qur'an together under an oral lens with the aim of mutually elucidating intriguing characteristics of both texts. After introducing the field of orality studies and assessing the oral characteristics of each text, it will be concluded that both Mark and the Qur'an were composed primarily for recitation via an oral register, that the controversial bookends of each work may be a result of codifying oral tradition, and that these early texts, once codified, potentially spurred the production of elaborative material within their own traditions.

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Introduction

Studies in Orality

The past century has seen a renewed understanding of literacy and its effects on tradition and composition. Starting most notably with the work of Milman Parry (1902-1935), students of classical literature began to identify odd characteristics of ancient writings as the residue of works originally composed in oral tradition rather than chirography (writing by hand). This distinction jostled scholars out of a common perception of ancient works, one that unwittingly ascribed literate psychodynamics to non-literate compositional modes. A wave of orality studies ensued, spreading into the fields of ancient Greek, Old English, Hispanic, Old French, African, and Biblical literatures.

As various of Parry's conclusions have been ratified, refined, revised, or rejected, his work has left a lasting impact on academia: "odd" characteristics of ancient literature may be the byproducts of works produced by an oral culture.

Mark and the Qur'an as Parallel Phenomena

Two works, both produced in oral contexts, have recently gained scholarly notice as potential oral compositions: the Gospel according to Mark

and the Qur'an. Although separated by language, culture, and theology, not to mention about 600 miles and 600 years, there are many literary and historical parallels between the two works which merit an examination of their texts in tandem:

- Mark and the Qur'an both exist as early writings,¹ perhaps the earliest, in their respective religious traditions.
- Both contain internal features that seem best explained by an oral intent of the works. In other words, whether primarily composed through oral or written means, both works seem designed for recitation via an oral register.
- Both appear early enough that they may even constitute the transition from oral teachings, the default pedagogy at the inception of their movements, to written teachings; regardless of whether the transition was motivated by the simple passage of time, the impending death of tradents, or the sacrality imputed to the oral teachings, the codification of these texts may have marked significant oral-to-written transitions in their respective tradition histories.

¹ It is noteworthy that the words "writing", "literature", and the like become turbid when discussing orality. Here the word "writings" is intended to mean "writing qua writings", as opposed to the proposed "oral Mark" or "oral Qur'an" and as opposed to Paul's letters, which were writings as a substitute for presence.

- Both Mark and the Qur'an form the foundation of further highly revered religious works; the majority of Mark was subsumed by both Matthew and Luke, and the Qur'an is the subject of a prodigious body of hadith literature.
- The canon of each text was subject to early dissension; in the case of Mark this is discovered through textual criticism, whereas in the case of the Qur'an it is recorded in both a precocious analogue of textual criticism² and in the hadith literature.

Critical studies of both Mark and the Qur'an have yielded many rich insights, and this is increasingly true regarding the burgeoning field of orality studies. However, these insights have not often been brought to bear upon one another, despite the many historical and literary similarities between these two works.³

² Ibn Abi Daud's *Kitab al-Masahif* as found in Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an: The Old Codices* (Leiden: Brill, 1937).

³ Although Mark and the Qur'an have many similarities that provide a basis for mutually elucidative investigation, there are a couple major disparities between Mark and the Qur'an that bear mentioning. The Qur'an was dictated over 23 years whereas Mark, at least in its codified form, took far less time to write. In addition, the Qur'an itself is a single work, or at the very least an anthology of surahs dictated by a single man, whereas Mark ultimately became part of a broader body of New Testament literature written by multiple authors. Neither points of discrepancy affect the literary context or presence of oral features in the books, though they do affect issues related to codification and canonicity. When using the similarities between the texts as a bridge to evaluate orality in these works, these two disparities ought to inform our perception of the data.

Thesis Overview

This thesis aims to bring the two distinct fields of study together in order to mutually elucidate otherwise “odd” characteristics of both texts. The first two sections will broadly assess the orality of Mark and the Qur’an respectively, surveying their contexts, internal features, processes of composition, and eventual codifications. It will be concluded after each survey that, indeed, the writing in question was produced with an *oral intent*; it was designed for recitation via an oral register, if not public proclamation or performance.

The third section of this paper will focus on two parallel characteristics of the Christian and Islamic traditions that have been the subject of controversy or intrigue: the bookends of Mark and the Qur’an and the ensuing traditions of the Synoptics and the hadith. It will be suggested that both phenomena could be a result of the transition of a burgeoning faith community from primarily oral teachings to written scriptures.

A Note Regarding Theology

At least two factors merit a respectful pause before continuing: that this thesis employs a critical method of studying sacred scriptures and that the subject matter contains a comparison of one scripture to another. Especially after Said’s enlightening and timely treatment of Orientalism, traditionalist

Islamic scholarship has often responded to critical Islamic studies with ardor and protest.⁴ This is neither surprising nor unwarranted, since anti-Islamic polemics are prevalent in popular discourse. In addition, it is possible some Christians might feel that even the suggestion of an oral provenance for the Gospel of Mark is an assault on the doctrine of inspiration. These concerns are all the more exacerbated by the fact that scriptures of both faiths are being compared to one another.

Therefore, the following must be stated with clarity and emphasis: though this thesis revisits our understanding of the nature of scripture, it is not intended to impugn or negate any theological tenet that may be close to the heart of Christians or Muslims. Inspiration, inerrancy, canonicity, and textual preservation can be envisioned in completely oral modes; indeed, this may be closer to how they were envisioned by the early Christians and Muslims.

⁴ Traditionalist Islamic scholars often evaluate critical Islamic studies as Western, Judeo-Christian attempts to discredit the theological claims of Islam. Regarding critical scholarship, Al-Azami states: "Attempts to distort Islam and its sacred texts are in fact as old as the religion itself... The first objective was to establish a protective fence around Christians to counteract the rapid advance of the new faith... the second phase of attack witnessed a shift in posture from defensive to offensive, aspiring to the mass conversion of Muslims or, at the least, of shattering any pride and resistance that emanated from their belief in Allah... A third phase, beginning in the mid 20th century on the heels of the founding of Israel, has actively sought to purge all verses that cast an unfavorable light on Jews." M.M. Al-Azami, *The History of The Qur'anic Text: From Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (London: UK Islamic Academy, 2003). 8-9. See also S.P. Manzoor, "Method Against Truth: Orientalism and Qur'anic Sciences," in *The Qur'ân, style and contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Brookfield: Ashgate, 2001).

Surveying the Orality of the Qur'an

The Qur'an is the center of Islamic theology. It is the proof offered to justify Muhammad's message (surah 2:23-25)⁵, and, as the speech of Allah, it most closely approximates the earthly manifestation of God in Islam.⁶ The unity of the revealed Qur'an and Allah in the Islamic conception is striking. The early Islamic debate between the Ash'aris and the Mu'tazilis concerning the nature of the Qur'an provides insight on the identity and the centrality of the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition. Suffice it to say the Ash'aris, who proposed an eternal, uncreated Qur'an, won the day and shaped the future of Islamic thought.

Indeed, Islam centers so much around the Qur'an that its inception is often marked by the revelation of the first Qur'anic verse to Muhammad in the cave of Hira.⁷ The enjoinder given to Muhammad at that occasion was أَقْرَأْ, *iqra*. Here we find a microcosm of our investigation. أَقْرَأْ is frequently translated by the imperative "read!" in English renditions of the Qur'an, but the word may be intended to elicit a wholly oral response, in which case it

⁵ Hereafter, Quranic references will be given according to the notation: S.2:23

⁶ William Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of "Quran", in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin, 160-175 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001). 160

⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari Book 1, Hadith 3

might better be rendered “recite!”⁸ Considering Muhammad was immediately given words to speak rather than told to read any written document, the latter ought to be preferred.⁹

Thus the advent of the Qur’an was imbued in orality: Muhammad was commanded to recite the words that were being recited to him, the word itself being أَقْرَأْ, “recite!” Indeed, the emphasis on oral recitation in this account of the Qur’an is an apropos foreshadow of the intended experience of the Qur’an in toto: the emphasis is thoroughly oral, as this examination will yield.

Context

Two contextual factors make it likely that the Qur’an was produced in an oral context for oral purposes: the development of Arabic script and the oral nature of the Arabic society.

The Development of Arabic Script

Scripts of Arabian provenance can be traced as far back as the second millennium BC.¹⁰ A variety of languages were in use from this time until the

⁸ Tafsir al-Jalalayn comments: “Recite, bring recitation into existence.” This goes one step further into an oral perspective, ascribing creative power to recitation.

⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari Book 1, Hadith 3

¹⁰ Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* (London: Routledge, 2001). 198

advent of Islam, almost all of which belonged to the Semitic family.¹¹

Although Old Arabic, the ancestor of classical Arabic, existed as early as the fifth century BC, it seems to have been seldom written until a century or so before Islam.¹²

Indeed, the few written records of Old Arabic in our possession before the 6th century are virtually all written in foreign scripts. The Qaryat al-Faw inscription, a first century BC¹³ funerary text found on a tomb, captured the Old Arabic language in the musnad script, a script belonging to foreign people with a foreign language.¹⁴ The multilingual 'En Avdat of 150 AD uses the Nabatean script, as does the Namarah inscription of 328 AD.^{15, 16} The Raqush inscription of 267 AD "is noteworthy for its many Arabisms", but is still described as "an eccentric mixture of Nabatean and Arabic."¹⁷

Arabists are agreed that the Jabal Ramm inscription, graffiti from a temple in Southern Jordan containing Arabic script, is the oldest so far discovered in the Arabic alphabet, though it continues to have Nabatean

¹¹ Hoyland 200

¹² Hoyland 201

¹³ This dating is disputed; Beeston dates the Qaryat al-Faw in the third century AD. A.F.L. Beeston, "Languages of Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Arabica*, 1981: 178-186.

¹⁴ A.R. Al-Ansary, *Qaryat Al-Faw: A Portrait Of Pre-Islamic Civilisation In Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: University of Riyadh, 1982). 146

¹⁵ J.A. Bellamy, "Arabic Verses from the First/Second Century: The Inscription of 'En 'Avdat," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 35 (1990): 73-79.

¹⁶ Beatrice Gruendler, *The Development Of The Arabic Scripts: From The Nabatean Era To The First Islamic Century According To The Dated Texts*, Vol. 43 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). 11-12

¹⁷ Gruendler 10

influences.¹⁸ Although it is of uncertain dating, the consensus seems to place it in the fourth or fifth century.¹⁹ After Jabal Ramm, the record of inscriptions using the Arabic alphabet begins to proliferate. Three such inscriptions from the sixth century have been well studied.²⁰

The arrival of the Qur'an in the early seventh century was thus at a time when the Arabic script was new to the scene. Indeed, some have called the Qur'an "the first Arabic book."²¹ According to Hoyland, the known writings of Pre-Islamic Arabia "cannot really be called literature."²² The script itself was still extremely primitive; vocalics had yet to be introduced, and diacritical marks were sporadically and irregularly used.²³ The techniques for writing the Arabic script were simply not ready to accommodate the robust language of the Arabs. The fact that the script could not fully contain the

¹⁸ J.A. Bellamy, "Two Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions Revised: Jabal Ramm and Umm Al-Jima 1," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (American Oriental Society) 108, no. 3 (1988): 369-378.

¹⁹ Grimme dates the inscription at 300 AD; Beeston refers to this as "uncertain", deferring to Diem's description of it as "too early"; Beeston 6. Bellamy points out that Grohmann dates the inscription between 328 and 350, but not without noting that Harding considers "such an early date highly unlikely" and that Littman suggests fourth or fifth century; Bellamy *Two Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions*, 370. Bellamy himself dates the inscription "in the fourth century without caring to be more precise than that"; *Inscriptions* 372.

²⁰ The Harran inscription is dated to 568 AD; Zebed, Jabal Husays are of similar dating, script, and provenance. Beeston 183.

²¹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Woods Press, 2008). vii

²² Hoyland 220; he allows two exceptions.

²³ Keith Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts* (Lexington Books, 2011). 69

language suggests that compositions in the 6th and 7th centuries were designed for oral purposes.

Oral Society

The social milieu of the Quran was highly oral, and pre-Islamic Arabs greatly valued rhetorical prowess. Classical Islamic commentator on poetics, Ibn Rashid, states:

When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes round about would gather to that family and wish them joy of their good luck. Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another. For a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame forever. (1.65)²⁴

It is worth noting that the poet himself, not his works, is the cause for celebration. He is inextricably linked with his poetry, as one would expect in an oral context. The spoken is not separated from the speaker.²⁵

Pre-Islamic poetry had developed into a dynamic field with multiple branches and styles, and poetry appears to have been integrated into commonplace contexts.²⁶ Ibn Ishaq, the earliest biographer of Muhammad's

²⁴ Hasan Ibn Rashid, *Al-'Umda* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'ada, 1963). Translation from Hoyland, 212.

²⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁶ See C.J. Lyall, *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry: Chiefly Pre-Islamic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930). See also Hoyland 212-219

life, captures this well. Lamentations, threats, panegyrics, and even some conversations are memorialized in poetry.²⁷

Despite the high position accorded to poetry and its abundant use, there are very few accounts of written poetry. Hoyland emphasizes that one has to rely on the oral preservation of tradition to sample poetry before the eighth century, when the poems began to be collected in writing.²⁸

Considering such a great estimation of rhetorical prowess, the dearth of written poetry and the total lack of literature are best explained by an oral context. Indeed, this is exactly what one would expect considering the state of Arabic script. In sum, it is rather likely that the Qur'an was revealed in a context that inclined itself towards oral compositions and their propagation through tradition.

Internal features

Apart from its context, a great many internal and textual features strongly suggest that the Qur'an was intended primarily for oral purposes.

The Earliest Quranic Texts

The earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an use the Kufic and Hijazi scripts.

Much like glancing at uncial New Testament manuscripts for the first time,

²⁷ See Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 364 and 439

²⁸ Hoyland 212

the Kufic and Hijazi strike even the novice as remarkably different from later Arabic. The text itself is simply the *rasm*, or the skeleton text primarily composed of consonants. There is a complete lack of vocalics (markings above or below the *rasm* which stand in for vowels) and irregular, sometimes contradictory systems of diacritical marks.²⁹

This deficiency is exacerbated by the fact that Arabic, as a Semitic language, is a rather compact. The vast majority of words are comprised of three root letters that can be modified by the addition of vowels and a limited range of other consonants to give a variety of words.³⁰ Given the importance of vowels in the Arabic language, the absence of vocalics from the manuscripts leaves the door wide open for variant readings and interpretations unless an oral tradition were to accompany the texts.

In addition to missing vocalics, it appears that there was no uniform orthography in use. Although Quranic textual criticism is still in its nascent stages, one consensual observation among text critics is that the most common category of variant among the earliest Qur'an manuscripts is variants involving the use of the *alif*. Small argues that the range of variants associated with *alif* is indicative of the flexibility of its system of usage in the

²⁹ Small 69

³⁰ Hoyland 200; he continues "thus in Arabic *kataba* means to write, *kâtaba* to correspond, *kitâb* a book, *kâtib* a scribe, *maktab* an office, *maktaba* a library, and so on."

earlier stages of Arabic script.³¹ Déroche goes further, arguing that no system of notating *alifs* was codified until the late eighth century.³²

Accordingly, scholars have asserted that the written texts of the Qur'an could not bear the weight of the Quranic tradition without a parallel oral tradition.³³ Indeed, the deficiencies of the script would necessitate the primacy of the oral tradition, making the written text the complement. Jones summarizes the prevailing consensus: "The defects of the script were of a nature that would be intolerable for a people relying strongly on the written word and placing little importance on oral tradition."³⁴

Multiple Versions of the Same Story

In his study of oral formulae in the Quran, Bannister calls attention to the story of Iblis and Adam.³⁵ The story is repeated seven times in the Qur'an, never verbatim and greatly variable in length (2:30, 7:11-18, 15:28-44, 17:61-64, 18:50, 20:116-227, and 38:71-85). Isolating 13 motifs of the story,

³¹ Small 36

³² Small 37

³³ "The Qur'an actually rested in the memory of the Companions rather than on these books and parchments." M.T. Usmani, *An Approach to the Qurānic Sciences: Uloom-ul-Quran* (Karachi: Darul Isa'at, 2000). See also Graham, *Beyond the Oral and Written Word*, 89

³⁴ A. Jones, "The Qur'an - II," in *Arabic Literature at the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A.F.L. Beeston, 228-245 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). 242

³⁵ Andrew Bannister, *Retelling the Tale: An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (London: London School of Theology, 2011).

Bannister finds that a core of 4 motifs is presented in each account³⁶ whereas the other 9 motifs are presented in only 3-4 of the 7 accounts.

In attempting to account for the variations and common core, Bannister proffers: “when one encounters seven retellings like this, especially in a text whose origins lie in a milieu which was largely oral, the question arises as to whether these stories are in fact performance variants – whether lying behind them are multiple oral tellings.”³⁷ Indeed, considering the pattern of variability, an oral mode of composition and propagation has better explanatory power than a written mode.

Oral Formulae

Bannister focuses the rest of his study on applying the theory of oral formulae to the Qur’an, empirically exploring its composition. His hypothesis: if the Parry/Lord oral formulaic theory is applied to the Qur’an, and the Qur’an can be shown to be composed of repeated formulae and systems of formulae, then it can be determined that the Qur’an was composed in an oral mode.

Using the morphologically tagged computer database of the Qur’an produced by Haifa University, Bannister analyzes the entire Qur’an algorithmically, looking for repeated, formulaic material. He concludes, “the

³⁶ One of the four core motifs is presented only 6 of the seven times.

³⁷ Bannister 37

result was astonishingly high – 52% of the text, according to the computer analysis, falls into this category.”³⁸ Another quantitative conclusion that arises from his study is that 75% of some surahs are composed of oral formulae.³⁹

In addition to the quantitative results, Bannister notes that two of the three most repeated formulas in the Qur’an are “power over all things” and “Allah is most merciful.”⁴⁰ According to Lord’s theory, the most stable and frequently repeated formulas ought to form the core ideas of a text or tradition. Given the great theological import of these formulae, Bannister concludes that “this is certainly what a computer analysis seems to demonstrate for the qur’anic text.”⁴¹

Although this kind of blunt application of the Lord/Parry theory to determine an oral mode of composition has been challenged by some,⁴² not many would deny that such formulae are strong markers for oral intent. Demonstrating the more conservative conclusion of oral intent is the aim of this treatment, though Bannister’s insights are compelling.

³⁸ Bannister 289

³⁹ Bannister 164; Surah 61 registers 77.88% formulaic, and Surah 64 registers 75.21%

⁴⁰ Bannister 157; the former is repeated 52 times, and the latter is repeated 46 times.

⁴¹ Bannister 289

⁴² Mary Sale, *Oral Formulaic Theory Today*, Vol. 218, in *Speaking Volumes; Orality and Literacy in the Greek and Roman World*, 53-80 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

Foreign Vocabulary

Among his discoveries, Parry noted the frequent usage of antiquated and foreign vocabulary while studying Homeric epics. He postulated that, although the words were not native to contemporary language, oral tradition had borne the words from distant lands or times to the epics. These words were nuanced or entrenched in tradition in such a way that they could not be substituted with other, more modern words. Foreign vocabulary is thus, in Parry's conception, a marker of oral composition. If he is correct, his idea has great implications for the Qur'an.

In laying foundational groundwork for future critical Quranic studies, Arthur Jeffery attempts to systematically understand Quranic vocabulary in its contemporary Arabian milieu. His book *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* suggests that many words found in the Qur'an are of a nonnative provenance. Noting that the "Muslim savant, indeed, is as a rule seriously distressed by any discussion of the foreign origin of words in the Qur'an,"⁴³ Jeffery suggests that this is a modern development and that assimilation of vocabulary into the Qur'an "was fully recognized by the earliest circle of Muslim exegetes,"⁴⁴ extensively citing as-Suyuti among others.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* viii

⁴⁴ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* vii

⁴⁵ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* 12-37

Jeffery divides the foreign vocabulary into three kinds: 1) Words which are entirely non-Arabic; 2) Words which are Semitic and whose triliteral root may be found in Arabic, but the usage of which is found in a non-Arabic sense; 3) Words which are genuinely Arabic but are “coloured in their meaning by the use of cognate languages.”⁴⁶ Although many of these words are proper nouns and, of necessity, must be foreign when employed, some of the words appear to be assimilated from foreign languages and used by the Qur’an in a fashion that Parry would argue lends credence to the thesis of Quranic oral composition.

One such word is, intriguingly, *qur’an*. In his discussion on the provenance of the word *qur’an*,⁴⁷ Arthur Jeffery agrees with the tendency in scholarship “to derive it from the Syriac (word) which means ‘the Reading’ in the special sense of Scripture lesson.” Jeffery highlights the fact that the contemporary Syriac language used the word in church lessons, and that “this is precisely the sense we need to illustrate the Qur’anic usage of the word for portions of scripture.” He concludes, “there can be little doubt that the word came to Muhammad from Christian sources.”

⁴⁶ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* 39

⁴⁷ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* 233-234

William Graham carries Jefferey's 1936 analysis into the present day, arguing along similar lines in his article *The Earliest Meaning of Qur'an*.

Contending for the Syriac derivation of the word *qur'an*, he states:

"In Syriac, Q-R-' has the sense 'to call, call out' and then 'to recite, read aloud (scriptural texts especially)'. Most crucial is the use of the substantive form *qeryana* specifically for the oral, liturgical 'reading' from holy writ and for the passage of scripture that is read... Such attestation can apparently now be confirmed in Syriac liturgical manuscripts of the 6th and 7th centuries C.E., which strengthens the argument for an historical influence here upon Arabic usage and for the vocal, oral sense of the Arabic."⁴⁸

It is noteworthy that Graham draws attention to both the Syriac origin of the word Qur'an and its specifically oral reference. The emphasis of the Syriac progenitor for the word *qur'an* is on the "vocal, oral" reading aloud of the text, not on any implication of literacy, according to Graham.

In total, Jeffery catalogues 316 foreign words in his work. If there is any merit to Parry's suggestion that foreign vocabulary denotes oral composition through tradition, then the existence of hundreds of such words in the Qur'an is a remarkable indicator of its oral nature.

⁴⁸ William Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of "Quran", " in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin, 160-175 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001). 163

The Quran's Self-Perception

Having briefly explored the Quranic use of the word *qur'an* above, it is fitting to consider whether the Quran's refers to itself and how. As opposed to Mark, which only shows shades of self-awareness,⁴⁹ the Qur'an is thoroughly self-aware. Usmani suggests that the Qur'an refers to itself with five titles, of which *Al-Quran* is the most common, used not less than 61 times.⁵⁰ Graham agrees that the Qur'an refers to itself most commonly as *qur'an*, but he disagrees that the word is intended as a title.⁵¹ He argues that such an understanding of the word is fallacious and retrojects a later understanding of the term onto the text.⁵² Rather, he suggests that the term functions as a generic noun: the text is *qur'an*, i.e. recitation. In other words, the text that Muhammad leaves with the ummah styled itself primarily as recitation, and only later did that recitation come to be called "The Recitation", lit. *Al-Qur'an*.

Although Usmani's thesis of multiple titles stands against Graham, Usmani agrees with the centrality of oral recitation above that of the written

⁴⁹ Mark 1:1 is the clearest self-referent in Mark's Gospel, but the meta-comment "let the reader understand" (Mk 13:14) offers another glimpse of self-awareness.

⁵⁰ Usmani 27-28

⁵¹ "Until the codification of what has since served as the *textus receptus* - or at least until active revelation ceased with Muhammad's death - there could have been no use of *al-qur'an* to refer to the complete body of 'collected revelations in written form'. Graham, *The Earliest Meaning*, 160

⁵² Graham, *The Earliest Meaning*, 160

text. He states: “Allah had granted a distinction to the Quran against other Divine Scriptures. Its preservation was done more through memory than pen and paper. According to Sahih Muslim, Allah assured the Prophet: ‘I am going to reveal to you a Book which water cannot wash.’”⁵³ He also quotes al-Baji, who says “the Quran cannot be separated from its recital in a manner that itself remaining safeguarded its recitals are abolished or become extinct.”⁵⁴

However, one of the five titles Usmani lists appears to stand against the thesis that the Qur’an is primarily an oral text. The Qur’an repeatedly calls itself *Al-Kitab*, “the book.”⁵⁵ If the Qur’an sees itself as a book, can it truly have been conceived of as a primarily oral text?

Usmani assesses the title, concluding: “The word ‘Book’ does not relate to mental thoughts but only when these thoughts are transformed into words these may be called a ‘Book’.”⁵⁶ In other words, the title “the Book” draws attention to the text, not the written words *per se*. Using modern terms, “the Book” need not refer to a hard copy, printed with ink and paper, but it is envisioned rather as a soft copy. The text is the book, not the writing.

⁵³ Usmani 181

⁵⁴ Usmani 136

⁵⁵ Cf. S.2:2

⁵⁶ Usmani 55-56

This interpretation appears to be corroborated by verses like S.62:2, which state that Muhammad will teach “the Book” to “the unlettered,” i.e. the illiterate. For a book to be learned by illiterate, the book must be understood as text, not writing. Of course, this is all the more true if the one teaching the book is himself illiterate, and the Qur’an repeatedly affirms Muhammad’s illiteracy (S.7:157-158, S.29:48).

Graham arrives at the same conclusion from a different approach. He translates the word *Al-Kitab* as “the scripture”⁵⁷ and suggests that Muhammad understood scripture in terms of the contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions of scripture. “Where these older scriptural traditions were very much in evidence, a ‘book’ used in liturgy and devotions would not have been a silently-read document but a sacred word that one proclaimed aloud and to which one listened with reverence.”⁵⁸ According to Graham, *Al-Kitab* is thus an oral concept to Muhammad and the Qur’an, as received from Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Graham, *The Earliest Meaning*, 159

⁵⁸ Graham, *The Earliest Meaning*, 164

⁵⁹ Graham immediately goes on to argue that people did not often distinguish between oral recitation and written text in ancient societies. He refers to an exception, the reference in Augustine’s *Confessions* to Ambrose’s ability to read without moving his voice or tongue, which was received with amazement and considered novel.

The Qur'an thus seems to consider itself an oral text. If this conclusion is accurate, it provides the most compelling argument that the Qur'an was composed with oral intent.

Surahs as Discrete Units

While analyzing the psychodynamics of illiterate storytellers, Ong suggests that aggregative thought, rather than analytic, characterizes oral composition. To illustrate his point, Ong refers to the introduction of Genesis, noting that virtually every subsequent thought is simply a clause tacked onto the previous thought.⁶⁰ Joanna Dewey elaborates on Ong, pointing out that the entire progression of an oral composition is aggregative, and that such works are composed of multiple, discrete units strung together like a pearl necklace.⁶¹ Interestingly, Islamic tradition concerning the composition of the Qur'an indicates that it was composed of discrete units, both on a verse level and on a surah level. In addition, critical analysis corroborates the Islamic records.

The Qur'an itself attests that it was composed piecemeal and in successive stages: "Those who reject Faith say: 'Why is not the Qur'an revealed to him all at once?' Thus (is it revealed), that We may strengthen thy

⁶⁰ Ong 37

⁶¹ Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980).

heart thereby, and We have rehearsed it to thee in slow, well-arranged stages, gradually” (25:32).⁶²

In addition to the Qur’an, As-Suyuti notes that Muhammad treated the surahs as discrete units, often referring to them by name and suggesting that newly revealed verses be placed within specific surahs.⁶³ This indicates that not only are surahs discrete units, but so are “packets” of verses that are placed into surahs. Thus the testimony of the Qur’an and early tradition concerning the composition of the Qur’an fit Ong and Dewey’s characterizations of discrete units in oral compositions.

More recently, Angelika Neuwirth has taken the argument even further, arguing that the Qur’an should not be examined as a single composition but rather as individual surahs, “the unit which was intended by the Prophet as the *forma medium* for his proclamation.”⁶⁴ Neuwirth argues that the name of each surah is not simply a proper name for a particular chapter, but rather “the name of a genre.”⁶⁵ Her insight is corroborated by the traditional definition of the word *surah*: “an enclosure or a fencing, such as the walls around a city.”⁶⁶ This definition, when ascribed to verses, seems to

⁶² Yusuf Ali translation

⁶³ Jalal al-Din As-Suyuti, *al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur’an* (Beirut: Dar al-Marifa). 141

⁶⁴ Neuwirth, *Some Remarks*, 254

⁶⁵ Neuwirth, *Some Remarks*, 255

⁶⁶ Qadhi, 160

imply the kind of loose connection one would expect of verses found within a genre, and not the kind of unified content found in a chapter of a book.

The history of the Quran's composition as preserved through tradition plus a glance at its organization in the form of distinct surahs seems to indicate that it was composed in discrete units, both on the verse level and on a macro level. When considering Ong's and Dewey's insights, the discrete nature of units in the Qur'an adds even more weight to the argument for its oral nature.

Summary of Internal Features

The internal features of the Qur'an thus point squarely towards an oral intent of the Quranic text. The earliest manuscripts could not sustain the Quranic text, but probably functioned as mnemonic aids for a primarily oral tradition; the multiple versions of the same stories suggest performance variants recorded as distinct verses; over half of the Qur'an is formulaic, implying an oral residue woven throughout the Qur'an; the foreign vocabulary suggests the incorporation of oral tradition into the Qur'an; the Qur'an appears to understand itself as an oral text; and the discrete units in the Qur'an are what one would expect if the Qur'an was composed in oral tradition or for oral purposes. The cumulative weight of the internal features

of the Qur'an strongly suggests an oral intent of the Qur'an, if not a fully oral provenance.

Composition

Our investigation has so far yielded that the context and the internal features of the Qur'an indicate it is primarily intended for oral use, if not composed entirely in an oral mode. However, when discussing the composition of the Qur'an, it behooves the investigator to explore the trove of resources in Islamic tradition.

Of course, the *hadith*, *sirah*, and *tafsir* are controversial in critical studies. Their use is the *sine qua non* of traditionalist circles,⁶⁷ while their legitimacy has been strongly disputed in many critical studies.⁶⁸ Not insignificant are those who have concluded that there is no kernel of historical truth in the traditions.⁶⁹

Without taking a strong position on the historical utility of the traditions, it would be worthwhile to see if they corroborate or disconfirm our findings hitherto. Our study ought to be informed by the traditions to some

⁶⁷ See Usmani, Khui, Azami, Qadhi

⁶⁸ For seminal works of this trend, see Goldziher and Schacht.

⁶⁹ Donner calls this the "Skeptical Approach" to the Qur'an. He names Patricia Crohne the "most articulate of the recent wave of skeptical writers." F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998). See also Wansbrough, Burton, and Cooke.

degree if the traditions either strongly support or strongly contravene the thesis.

Oral Revelation

That the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad orally is the unanimous testimony of tradition. Muhammad heard the Qur'an recited to him, and he in turn dictated it to others. The Qur'an itself seems to indicate this in S.75:16-19, although there is too much ambiguity in the referents to be sure. Tafsir al-Jalalayn and Tafsir ibn Abbas both agree that these verses are, in fact, discussing the process of revelation to Muhammad.⁷⁰

Pickthall translates these verses as follows:

v.16: Stir not thy tongue herewith to hasten it.

v.17: Lo! Upon Us (resteth) the putting together thereof and the reading thereof.

v.18: And when We read it, follow thou the reading;

v.19: Then lo! Upon Us (resteth) the explanation thereof."

According to Tafsir ibn Abbas, v.16 is enjoining Muhammad not to try and recite the Qur'an before the angel Gabriel had finished reciting it to him. "The Prophet (pbuh) used to repeat whatever revelations of the Qur'an Gabriel brought down to him before the latter finished a sentence of the Qur'an, out of fear of forgetting what was revealed to him. Allah warned him against doing

⁷⁰ Both tafasir have been referenced online: <http://www.AlTafsir.com>

so.” The next verse follows up the idea, stating that Allah will make sure the verse is remembered in Muhammad’s heart and recited correctly.⁷¹

Equally intriguing is v.18. Al-Jalalayn expounds upon the Quran’s wording: “So, when We recite it, to you, by means of Gabriel’s recital, follow its recitation, listen to its recitation: thus the Prophet would listen to it and then repeat it.” If one uses the interpretation of Ibn Abbas and the Jalals as the model for Quranic composition,⁷² the Qur’an was to be recited aloud by Muhammad as it was recited to him, and Muhammad was to learn it by heart. This mode of composition is rife with orality and bereft of explicit chirography.

It is important to note that even though the concern here is the preservation of the recitation, no suggestion is made to write the revelation or to even jot down mnemonic aids. In fact, there is no indication in the Qur’an that the Qur’an was being written, or was to be written at all, even as aides-memoires.

Interestingly, on one occasion the Qur’an does enjoin writing, not for its own text, but for loan transactions. S.2:282 enjoins Muslims to obtain a scribe and multiple witnesses. The one receiving the loan is to dictate to the

⁷¹ Al-Jalalayn: “Assuredly it is for Us to bring it together, in your breast, and to recite it, your reciting of it, that is, its flowing off your tongue.”

⁷² Within the Islamic theological conception, I am referring to the earthly transcription of the Qur’an

scribe, and the scribe is told not to be “averse to writing down (the contract) whether it be small or great, with the term thereof.”⁷³ Considering this verse, it becomes clear that writing was possible, but it was toilsome. In addition, though a written record would be in the possession of the creditor, multiple witnesses are still required. It seems the written record will only be valid as a complement to the oral testimony of witnesses. Indeed, the rest of the verse seems to indicate that witnesses are more important.⁷⁴

Regardless, though the Qur’an does indicate that loan transactions must be written, the Qur’an never indicates that its own text was ever written. For that, one must turn to the traditions.

Amanuenses in Tradition

There are multiple lists of Muhammad’s amanuenses in the hadith literature. Conservatively, Qadhi suggests that Muhammad had the assistance of at least 24 scribes, including the four caliphs and Zaid ibn Thabit.⁷⁵ These are said to have written the revelation as Muhammad dictated it to them.

Of course, the very suggestion that the Qur’an was recorded through a process of dictation and transcription implies its primarily oral nature.

Accounts of Muhammad’s dictation state that he would learn and dictate

⁷³ Pickthall translation

⁷⁴ The verse continues on to provide an injunction for material transactions (as opposed to a loan transaction). In this case, writing is optional, though witnesses are still required.

⁷⁵ Qadhi 129

about five verses at a time.⁷⁶ This would essentially create an aggregative pattern of thought or a paratactic arrangement of verse packets, producing the kind of work that is borne of oral composition. Without entering into the theological debate about whether Muhammad was the author of the Qur'an or simply its tradent, it can be agreed that the process of dictation inclines one to understand the Qur'an as a primarily oral product.

What is most intriguing about the process of dictation and inscription is the flexibility allowed for the scribes according to certain traditions. Regarding one scribe it is said: "The Messenger of God used to dictate to him *sami'un 'alim* or *'azizun hakim*, or something to that effect, used as verse endings... The man would sometimes inquire from the Messenger of God, saying, 'Is it *'azizun hakim* or *sami'un 'alim* or *'azizun 'alim*?' The messenger would say to him, 'Whichever you write is all right.'"⁷⁷ This kind of flexibility makes more sense if Muhammad conceived of the Qur'an as an oral text.

It is worth noting that the words identified as flexible in this tradition are formulaic verse endings. If this tradition is historically accurate, Muhammad seems to be describing the kind of flexibility allowed by oral formulae, a corroboration of the Parry Theory. In addition, the tradition

⁷⁶ Al-Azami 152-153

⁷⁷ Found in Al-Khui's *Prolegomena*, 124; "a tradition reported by Yunus on the authority of Ibn Shihab, who said 'Sa'id b. al-Musayyab informed me...'"

depicts Muhammad in the process of revelation. If this moment is analogous to the moment of composition, then that would be precisely the moment when one formula could substitute another, a second potential confirmation of the Parry Theory.

The Ahruf

According to tradition, flexibility was not just for scribes, but also for the reciters. A whole subfield of traditions indicates that the Qur'an made allowances for variation in recitation, called *ahruf*.⁷⁸ According to Muhammad, a single recitation could be recited in multiple *ahruf*. Although the delimitations of the *ahruf* are not clear, traditions indicate that: 1) the variations did not render the recitations unrecognizable to those who did not know that *harf*;⁷⁹ 2) the variations were enough to arouse concern and anger by those who were unaware of the multiple *ahruf*; 3) certain *ahruf* allowed for the substitution of entire words, but not the substitution of opposing concepts.⁸⁰

Islamic Traditionalists have struggled for centuries to understand exactly what the *ahruf* are and what kind of variability they allow. One intriguing insight embedded in the traditions is that the *ahruf* were an

⁷⁸ Qadhi considers the tradition concerning *ahruf* to reach the level of *mutawaatir*. He mentions that as-Suyuti lists 21 companions who narrate the ahadith about the seven *ahruf*. 173

⁷⁹ *harf* = singular, *ahruf* = plural

⁸⁰ Qadhi 175

allowance for the “illiterate nation” to which the Qur’an was sent.⁸¹ For this reason, commentators have suggested that the *ahruf* were an allowance to use synonyms for various words in the Qur’an.⁸² Some traditionalists believe that this is the majority view of Islamic scholarship.⁸³

Indeed, this characteristic of the Quranic text, much like the flexibility allowed for scribes, is easiest to explain if the Qur’an is conceived as an oral text than a written text. This is certainly what the traditions imply when they suggest that the Qur’an is revealed for an illiterate nation, and that is why the *ahruf* are required.

Abrogation

One final characteristic of the Qur’an that permeates tradition is called the doctrine of abrogation, and it is derived from S.2:106: “Nothing of our revelation (even a single verse) do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but we bring (in place) one better or the like thereof.”⁸⁴ Sunni traditionalists generally consider the Qur’an to have been abrogated in different ways, distinguishing between the abrogation of the recitation and the abrogation of

⁸¹ Usmani 121: "The Holy Prophet met Jibril near the rocks of Marwah. He said to Jibril, 'I have been sent to an unlettered nation which comprises the aged nearing their graves, elderly women, and also children.' Jibril said, 'Ask them to recite the Quran on seven *ahruf*.'" (quoting *An Nashr-fil-qiraatul 'ashr*, v1, p20)

⁸² According to Usmani, this is the view of Imam Tahavi, Sufyan bin 'Uyainah and Ibn Wahb. 113

⁸³ Hafiz Ibn 'Abdul Barr goes on to attribute the view to most scholars. Usmani 113

⁸⁴ A similar sentiment is found in 16:101

injunctions.⁸⁵ The forms that are of present interest involve the abrogation of recitation, denoting the removal of text from the canon of the Qur'an.

Certain accounts indicate that hundreds of verses that were once a part of the Qur'an are no longer found in the canon.⁸⁶ Many more traditions recount smaller portions of the recited Qur'an that are no longer canonical.⁸⁷ The preponderance of traditions recording the abrogation of the Quranic text has been met with skepticism from Shia scholars⁸⁸ and a few critical

⁸⁵ Traditionalists have attempted to systematize abrogation into three kinds, all related to commands and prohibitions: 1) abrogation of recitation but not practice; 2) abrogation of practice but not recitation; 3) abrogation of both recitation and practice. There are plenty of disagreements and traces of continuing evolution of this system; Qadhi has recently offered a fourth kind of abrogation to account for ahadith like Sahih Muslim #2286: "There are also references to a number of verses not related to commands and prohibitions whose recitation was abrogated." (242)

⁸⁶ Sahih Muslim #2286: Abu Harb b. Abu al-Aswad reported on the authority of his father that Abu Musa al-Ash'ari sent for the reciters of Basra. They came to him and they were three hundred in number. They recited the Qur'an and he said: You are the best among the inhabitants of Basra, for you are the reciters among them. So continue to recite it. (But bear in mind) that your reciting for a long time may not harden your hearts as were hardened the hearts of those before you. We used to recite a surah which resembled in length and severity to (Surah) *Bara'at*. I have, however, forgotten it with the exception of this which I remember out of it: "If there were two valleys full of riches, for the son of Adam, he would long for a third valley, and nothing would fill the stomach of the son of Adam but dust." And we used to recite a surah which resembled one of the surahs of *Musabbihat*, and I have forgotten it, but remember (this much) out of it: "O people who believe, why do you say that which you do not practise" (lxi. 2) and "that is recorded in your necks as a witness (against you) and you would be asked about it on the Day of Resurrection" (xvii. 13).

⁸⁷ Bukhari 61.558; Muslim 3421; Sunan Abu Daud 3.1015; Jami at-Tirmidhi 2982; As-Suyuti 204

⁸⁸ cf. Al-Khui, pp.135-161 and 186-248, especially 192: "maintaining that a recitation is abrogated is actually the same as maintaining the opinion about alteration."

scholars,⁸⁹ but Sunni scholars and most critical scholars are more sanguine in their approach to these traditions.

The first point to note concerning abrogation is that, according to the Qur'an, Allah considers the process analogous to forgetting: "Nothing of our revelation *do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten* but we bring one better or the like thereof." Indeed, many traditions discuss the phenomenon of "forgetting" the Qur'an.⁹⁰ Some of these conclude explicitly that verses Muslims could not remember had been abrogated.⁹¹

If the Qur'an had been envisioned as a written text, simply forgetting the verses would not do away with the recitation. The text itself would have to be stricken and destroyed. Indeed, it may be that the Uthmanic recension was performing precisely this function after the text had begun making the transition from oral to written. During Muhammad's time, neither in the Qur'an nor in tradition are there accounts of mass edition of texts. The people are simply told that Allah will cause them to forget.⁹²

The second point is along similar lines: the concept of abrogating an eternal, sacred text makes more sense if the text is conceived of orally. An eternal, sacred, *written* text cannot be edited without compromising the

⁸⁹ cf. John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*.

⁹⁰ Bukhari 61.558; Sunan Abu Daud 25.3959; Muslim 2286

⁹¹ As-Suyuti 3.74

⁹² S. John Gilchrist, *Jam' al-Qur'an - The Codification of the Qur'an Text* (Mondeor: MERCSA, 1989).2:106 and 16:101

concept of its eternity at a very specific time in a very concrete manner. The edition would require a real, physical change. An eternal, sacred, *spoken* text can more easily accommodate abrogation in practice, since there is none of the cognitive dissonance that comes with putting a “red pen” to an eternal text. One simply ceases reciting those verses.

Summary of Composition

It appears, then, that Islamic tradition is inclined towards an oral text. The Qur'an itself indicates that Muhammad received the Qur'an orally; when addressing the concern that Muhammad might forget the revelations, Allah makes no mention of writing the text, but rather states that Allah himself would guard the reading in Muhammad's heart; scribes received the text from Muhammad orally, and were given some latitude in their transcriptions; the recitations themselves had a measure of fluidity, and many traditionalists have concluded that Muhammad allowed the kind of flexibility permissible of an oral text by allowing the substitution of synonyms when needed; the Qur'an envisions the removal of recitation from its canon as analogous to forgetting, a process which does not fit the construct of a written text; and the concept of abrogating an eternal word is more amenable to an oral text than a written one.

Although it may be controversial to learn about Muhammad through the traditions, they are strongly inclined towards the composition of the Qur'an as an oral text. At the very least it can be concluded that when the traditions were collected, the Muslim community envisioned the origins of the Qur'an in a manner that indicates an oral text, consistent with the internal features of the Qur'an from a few centuries prior.

Codification

At the time of Muhammad's death, much of the Qur'an was still in flux. The canon had yet to be settled and centuries remained before the Arabic script could capture a specific oral reading. This process of codification, as found in tradition and history, continued into the twentieth century and is currently in its final phases. This gradual codification gives us some final insight into the nature of the Quranic text.

The Uthmanic Recension: Canon Contention

In tradition, certain disagreements regarding the text of the Qur'an can be traced to the Uthmanic recension.⁹³ Within the first few years after Muhammad's death, tradition indicates that Abu Bakr commissioned a

⁹³ This term 'recension' is borrowed from John Gilchrist's *Jam al-Qur'an*, and though it is representative of most references to the event, an alternative term will be proffered in the assessment of this subsection.

collection of the Qur'an. A few years later, Uthman ordered a recension of the first collection as well as a mandate for all Muslims to destroy any physical manuscripts of the Qur'an that were in their possession. He is reputed to have sent a few Qurans throughout the Islamic Empire after the recension.⁹⁴

Some of the tradents who had been chosen by Muhammad to teach the Qur'an,⁹⁵ and were subsequently sent to foreign lands for this purpose, disagreed with the Uthmanic recension. Abdullah ibn Masud refused to relinquish his personal codex. Although records show many minor variants between ibn Masud's text and Uthman's text, his adamant resistance indicates a more serious concern than the flexibility of verbiage.

Multiple records explain that ibn Masud's canon differed with Uthman's canon concerning three surahs: 1, 113, and 114 (the first in the Uthmanic canon and the final two).⁹⁶ These he considered to be divinely revealed prayers, but not of the same material that comprises the rest of the Qur'an.

A similar incident is reported concerning Ubay ibn Kab. Whereas the Uthmanic Qur'an contains 114 surahs, ibn Kab adds two more: al-Hafd and

⁹⁴ Bukhari 61.510

⁹⁵ Bukhari 61.521; the two tradents in question are Abdullah ibn Masud and Ubay ibn Kab.

⁹⁶ Ibn Abi Daud, As-Suyuti, and ibn Nadim

al-Khal. Others, such as Abu Musa, concur with ibn Kab in including these surahs in the Quranic canon.

The Uthmanic Recension: Disputed Sections and Verses

In addition, some of the material traditionally considered abrogated ought also to be considered in this category. The two missing chapters reported in Sahih Muslim 2286 merit consideration. Umar was resolute that the verse of stoning ought to have been included in the Qur'an,⁹⁷ and indeed these verses were found within the codex of ibn Kab.⁹⁸ The infamous verse of breastfeeding adults, if authentic, also constitutes a disputed section of the Qur'an.

Aside from missing sections, it is also reported that disputes existed at the verse level. Aisha recited words in certain verses that were not found in the Uthmanic canon.⁹⁹ Ibn Kab's Qur'an also contained intra-verse variants, one of which has found its way into the modern Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'an.¹⁰⁰ Ibn Masud's codex contained similar variants, some of which have been corroborated by a recent palimpsest find.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Qadhi 241; this Qur'an could either be the one produced under the auspices of Abu Bakr or the oral text being recited during Umar's time.

⁹⁸ As-Suyuti 3.72

⁹⁹ Jami at-Tirmidhi 2982

¹⁰⁰ Found at 33:6

¹⁰¹ Alba Fedeli in *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into its Early History*, ed. K.H. and Puin, G.R. Ohlig (Amherst: Prometheus, 2009).

The Uthmanic Recension: Variant Surah Orders

It is also worth noting that tradition and physical evidence indicate disparities in the order of the surahs. Ibn Masud and Ubay both varied in their surah order from the Uthmanic order.¹⁰² Sometimes these variant orders agreed with one another. For example, the first 10 surahs in Ubay's Qur'an are in the order: 1, 2, 4, 3, 6, 7, 5, 10, 8, 9.¹⁰³ In Ibn Masud's Qur'an, the first 12 are: 2, 4, 3, 7, 6, 5, 10, 9, 16, 11.¹⁰⁴ Both agree in placing surah 4 before surah 3, in placing surah 5 after surahs 6 and 7, in placing surah 10 before surah 9, etc.

Other than the records of tradition, the Sana'a Manuscript discovery in Yemen corroborates the existence of early manuscripts with variant surah orders.¹⁰⁵

The Uthmanic Recension: An Assessment

The Uthmanic recension is often recognized as one of the greatest milestones in the history of the Qur'an. Even so, it is under-rated. The Uthmanic recension, even if conceived according to tradition, marks the true genesis of the Qur'an as it is known today. The moment Uthman authorized a written text of the Qur'an, there was a collision between the oral Qur'an of

¹⁰² Qadhi 161

¹⁰³ Jeffery, *Materials*, 115; using the Uthmanic surah numbers

¹⁰⁴ Jeffery, *Materials*, 22; using the Uthmanic surah numbers

¹⁰⁵ G. R. Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'an Manuscripts in San'a," in *The Qur'an as Text*, 107-111 (Leiden: Brill, 1996). 110-111

Muhammad's time and a new, written modality. No longer was it just the "soft copy" that was conceived as the word of Allah, the text in recitation, but now also a "hard copy," the text on paper. The contentions concerning the canon, the disputes about sections and verses, and the variant order of surahs were the resultant collateral damage.

Muhammad himself intended there to be areas of grey in the text of the Qur'an. This is not only indicated by the existence of the *ahruf*, but also at his indignation when Muslims would disagree over the text.¹⁰⁶ The flexibility in the text is what made the abrogation possible, what allowed unity among Muslims with disparate lexicons, and what made the text directly accessible to illiterates. When Uthman codified the text, it became rigid. Synonyms would no longer be usable when needed and illiterates would now only have indirect access to the Qur'an.

This was the moment when abrogation would have become implausible had Muhammad not already passed. All the same, prior abrogations had to be reduced to writing, and this yielded the disputes over which sections were truly abrogated and which were not. In addition, the early Muslims had to take a stand on revelation that had skirted the borders

¹⁰⁶ According to Khui, At-Tabari relates from Ibn Mas'ud "We were debating about a sura of the Qur'an, whether it had thirty-five or thirty-six verses... The Prophet's face became red [with anger] and he said, 'Surely those before you perished only because of their disagreement.'" Khui 122.

between Qur'an and non-Qur'an.¹⁰⁷ Until the codification, simply avoiding the recitation of those revelations in liturgy would avoid conflict. After codification, opinions were forced to the fore, and disputes ensued from expert tradents. Non-substantive intra-verse variants, which were natural byproducts of the fluid oral text, would become curious anomalies recorded in *Kitab al-Masahif* and the like.¹⁰⁸ Substantive intra-verse variants, made obsolete by codification but kept alive in tradition, became the stuff of hadith. The surahs, which had been cordoned individually or in groups, now had to be placed in a canonical order.

Thus it is that the canonical disputes concerning the bookends of the Qur'an, the disparities in sections and verses, and the variant surah orders are all a necessary result of the codification of the Qur'an text. Uthman's revolutionary contribution to the Qur'an was not in the recension but in the codification.

Incomplete Codification

As monumental as the Uthmanic Codification was, the Qur'an was not completely codified at that time. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary

¹⁰⁷ Both the Qur'an and *hadith qudsi* were considered divine revelation; the former was intended for liturgical recitation, whereas the latter was intended for personal prayers

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Abi Daud's *Kitab al-Masahif* is the only remnant of a field of Quranic studies regarding textual variants. Al-Qisai and al-Faraa' are said to have compiled similar works that have been lost, and up to seven more authors in the first four centuries of Islam may have written such works. Qadhi 148

Arabic script was unable to capture the Qur'an without a parallel oral tradition. Therefore the oral text survived, but it was now conjoined with a written complement and many of the trappings of a written text.

Apart from the persistence of a living oral tradition, two additional elements prevented the Qur'an from complete codification: the scriptum defectivum itself and the variants in the multiple Qurans that Uthman produced. These two elements, combined with a few hundred years of time, yielded many disparate recitations of the canonical Qur'an.¹⁰⁹ All the recitations that resulted from the canonical Qur'an were, of necessity, canonical.

Qira'at

As the Arabic script developed to higher levels of precision,¹¹⁰ the Qur'an was affected in two opposing ways. First, the many recitations became inscribable and were, in turn, codified. Dozens of these readings began to be viewed as truly separate readings as opposed to fluid variations of the same text. These readings are called *qira'at*, and the study of disparate *qira'at* and their traditions has since become the primary occupation of many devout students of the Qur'an.

¹⁰⁹ Though tempered, of course, by the surviving oral text.

¹¹⁰ The *tashkeel* (vocalics) and *nuqaat* (system of dots) were gradually employed with increasing regularity, allowing a specific recitation to be reproduced with precision.

Second, the common perception of texts began to limit the allowable variability. By the time of Ibn Mujahid in 322 AH, attempts were being made to reduce the number of canonical recitations. Ibn Mujahid was able to reduce the number of allowable recitations to as low as seven.¹¹¹ Those who attempted to continue in the old paradigm of Qur'an recitation by utilizing previously canonical recitations were flirting with heresy, as the unfortunate Ibn Shanabudh discovered.

The Printed Qur'an

Though multiple *qira'at* continue in theory even to this day, one event has virtually eradicated their presence from Muslim practice: the printing of the Qur'an. In 1924, a committee of scholars in Cairo agreed upon one specific *qirra*¹¹² and one specific orthography. They then printed a Qur'an that became the standard Qur'an throughout the Muslim world. Apart from one other *qirra* recited by approximately 3% percent of Muslims,¹¹³ no other recitation is in common use. In the process of mass printing, the oral tradition has become superfluous and, apart from that which was assimilated into the printing or that which remains in ivory towers, altogether eradicated. When the Cairo printing overtakes the last *qirra*, a virtually foregone conclusion, it

¹¹¹ The actual number is disputed, since around the same time cases were made for allowing up to 14 *qira'at*, perhaps even by Ibn Mujahid himself.

¹¹² Singular form of *qira'at*; the one they picked was *Hafs 'an Asim*.

¹¹³ *Warsh an Nafi*, recited in parts of Algeria, Morocco, parts of Tunisia, W. Africa, and Sudan. Qadhi 199

will be all that remains of a once oral and fluid text. The 1924 Royal Cairo Edition has effectively become the Qur'an.

Assessment

Historically and literarily, the Qur'an is best explained as an oral text. It arrived at a time when Arabic books had not been, and could not be, written. The performance variants recorded in the Qur'an, along with the oral formulae and the foreign vocabulary, fit precisely the characteristics of oral compositions as outlined by Lord and Parry. Its aggregative nature and its discrete units are the expected products of preliterate psychodynamics, again suggesting that it was composed in orality. That it was an oral text indeed explains the appearance of the earliest manuscripts: the skeletal *rasm* script could not have borne the entirety of the Quranic text.

Stepping back from the context and internal text of the Qur'an, the records of its composition corroborate that it was perceived as a primarily oral text. When Uthman codified the text, he introduced a gradual process that is coming to completion in our time by taking the form of one written text, a modern Egyptian printing.

This thesis has significant explanatory power; that the Qur'an underwent a process of codification from oral text to written at more or less the same time the text was being canonized explains many of the otherwise

“odd” characteristics. The *ahruf*, the disputed bookends of the Qur’an, and perhaps even the accounts of abrogation in the traditions can be attributed to this process.

In conclusion, it is most likely that the Qur’an was originally conceived as oral text and, through a gradual process of codification, has become the text in our possession today.

Surveying the Orality of Mark

The Gospel of Mark stands out among the canonical gospels as the most notably oral. Like the Qur’an, though certainly not to the same extent, it was composed in a highly oral context. Unlike the Qur’an, unfortunately, there is a dearth of early commentary regarding Mark, let alone the specific aspect of its composition.¹¹⁴ Therefore one must rely almost entirely on its internal features to determine the primary modality of its text, whether oral or written.

One fact merits emphasis early in the discussion because its magnitude is such that it ought to color our perception of the data. Unlike the Qur’an,

¹¹⁴ There are certainly mentions of Mark’s gospel in the first few centuries after its writing. Papias comments on Mark in the early to middle second century, stating that he was the scribe of Peter (Eusebius’ *Church History*. 3.39). Irenaeus makes a similar comment toward the end of the second century (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1), as does Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.5). Relative to the vast amounts of commentary on the Qur’an, though, there is little comparison.

Mark is not the kind of opus that can be treated by the Lord/Parry thesis. Mark is not metered poetry, as were the Homeric and Slavic epics Parry so carefully scrutinized. Neither is Mark formulaic, the most important marker of oral composition that Parry isolates. This is not to argue against the oral composition of Mark, but simply to say that one cannot immediately categorize Mark with the Qur'an in terms of genre. The style of the former is much less inclined to orality, a priori, than the latter. Thus the question of Mark's primary modality is more abstruse than that of the Qur'an. This issue shall be revisited with more depth in the "composition" subsection below, after surveying the context of Mark and its internal features.

Context

Though it cannot be stated with much certainty where Mark was composed, it can be stated with virtual certainty that the vast majority of the population was illiterate. The simple reason for this is that literate population of the Graeco-Roman world rarely, if ever, was more than 20%.¹¹⁵ In the case of Roman Palestine, where Jesus tradition was first propagated, it has been

¹¹⁵ It is the opinion of Whitley and Harris "that the literate population of the ancient world seldom, if ever, exceeded 20% of the population as a whole, and that 10% is a realistic maximum estimate of the proportion of the population that was literate in Classical Athens." James Whitley, "Cretan Laws and Cretan Literacy," *American Journal of Archaeology* (Archaeological Institute of America) 101, no. 4 (1997): 635-661. 639

suggested that literacy rates were closer to 3%.¹¹⁶ The stream of tradition that carries Jesus from the cross to Mark's hand was almost certainly oral.

Remnants of this oral tradition are found in other canonical books of the New Testament. Apart from the obvious testimony of Acts,¹¹⁷ Paul passes on tradition about Jesus including his Davidic lineage, teachings concerning marriage, his crucifixion, his appearances, his acquaintance with Cephas and "the twelve," and his last supper (E.g. Rom 1:3, 4:25; 1 Cor 7:10-11, 11:23-26, 15:3-8; Phil 2:8; 1 Thes 2:15, 4:14).

Of course, we can only count this as oral tradition if we consider Paul's letters to be substitutes for his presence, which approaches question begging. Regardless, Paul received the tradition from someone, and it is safe to assume that Peter passed oral tradition concerning Jesus onto Paul on at least one occasion (Gal 1:18, 2:1-2).¹¹⁸ In addition, Paul received tradition which he passes forward, including the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 and the creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. These early traditions have the marks of oral psychodynamics; it has been argued that the former was written with meter

¹¹⁶ Meir Bar-Ilan, *Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E.*, Vol. II, in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, ed. S. Schoenfeld, and A. Goldschlaeger S. Fishbane, 46-61 (New York, 1992). 55-56

¹¹⁷ In view here are the speeches (beginning with Peter's sermon in 2:14-36) and interpersonal dialogue (such as the discussion about Jesus' betrayal during the appointment of Matthias in 1:16-22).

¹¹⁸ See C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960). 16

and rhyme in the form of stanzas,¹¹⁹ while the latter is clearly pithy and aggregative. That Paul, the composer of the first known Christian writings, receives what could potentially be well structured oral formulations indicates the rich context of orality during the earliest stratum of Christianity.

It is during this early Christian context of oral tradition propagation that Mark composes his gospel. Mark's passion narrative overlaps to a significant degree with the tradition Paul relays piecemeal. On one occasion, Paul says he "received from the Lord what (he) also passed on" (1 Corinthians 11:23). Upon reflection it appears that this is an explicit reference to a line of oral tradition from Jesus to Paul and beyond. He then relays the words of Jesus during the last supper, stating that the event occurred on the night of Jesus' arrest and referring to the bread and the cup as the body and the blood. The parallel between Paul's oral account and Mark's account is striking, suggesting a common oral source tradition.¹²⁰

It has also been argued that Mark's passion narrative can be traced back to the first decade or so of Christianity.¹²¹ Gerd Theissen has argued that the lack of names in Mark's account of the garden of Gethsemane is best explained by a motivation to keep key figures anonymous for reasons that

¹¹⁹ Joseph Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Background of Philippians 2:6-11," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988). 471

¹²⁰ Compare 1 Cor 11:23-25 with Mk 14:22-24

¹²¹ G. and Merz, A. Theissen, *Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Publishers, 1998). 100-101

were only pertinent immediately after Jesus' arrest.¹²² Bauckham furthers the argument by suggesting that Mark's mention of the names 'Rufus' and 'Alexander' is for purposes of verification, indicating a continued presence of these figures at the time of the narrative's composition and therefore an early provenance.¹²³

If these arguments are found to bear the weight of scrutiny, Mark would not only be immersed in a context of oral tradition, but it would be found partaking from the common stream of that tradition rather near the source.

Internal features

Contextual issues aside, the *sine qua non* of orality in Mark are the internal features of the gospel. Here we must rely on the insights of Ong, Bakker, Chafe, and others who illumine the characteristics of speech and the psychodynamics of illiteracy.

Paratactic Arrangement

One of Ong's observations that immediately comes to mind when perusing Mark is that oral discourse is often syntactically simple, linking

¹²² Theissen. Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1992). 165-199

¹²³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006). 52

clauses and thoughts together in a chain (parataxis) rather than subordinating one thought to another (hypotaxis). He attributes the complexity of written discourse to its dependence upon linguistic structure to provide meaning, “since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar.”¹²⁴

For the mind habituated to literate compositions, this would give an oral composition a hurried and unsophisticated appearance characterized by many additive “ands.”¹²⁵ This has been precisely the observation of Mark by modern Biblical scholarship, often accompanied by disparaging remarks regarding Mark’s lack of literary finesse.¹²⁶

In his analysis, Decker goes as far as to say “perhaps the most distinctive feature of Mark’s idiolect is his paratactic style.”¹²⁷ He points out that 64% of the sentences in Mark’s Gospel begin with καὶ (“and”), and that

¹²⁴ Ong 38

¹²⁵ Ong 37

¹²⁶ T.C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency* (Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 2005) 177. For examples of such criticism, see E. Trocmé, *The Formation of the Gospel According to Mark*, 68-72; or V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 52.

¹²⁷ Rod Decker, *Parataxis in Mark's Gospel*, November 13, 2009, <http://ntresources.com/blog/?p=672> (accessed March 26, 2012).

80 of 88 sections in Mark begin with *καί*. Others have also commented on the ubiquitous use of *καί* in Mark's gospel, presenting similar findings.¹²⁸

Wire notes that the parataxis appears not only in the discourse relayed by Mark, but also in the narrative and the teaching.¹²⁹ She argues that Mark uses *καί* as "a staple of common speech that has been set off here as special or traditionalizing speech."¹³⁰

Wire's observation of Mark is congruent with Bakker's observations regarding the phenomenon of speech.¹³¹ Referring to the work of Chafe,¹³² he argues that spoken language is produced in short spurts called "intonation units."¹³³ When an intonation unit is clausal, "it is often linked to the preceding discourse by connective particles, of which *and* is by far the most common."¹³⁴ Thus, according to Bakker, the paratactic prevalence of *and* is an indicator of speech.

¹²⁸ James Kleist, *The Gospel of Saint Mark* (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1936) 3-89; F. Neirynck, *Duality in Mark: Contributions to the Study of the Markan Redaction* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988). 139-91.

¹²⁹ A.C. Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Cascade Books, 2011). 80

¹³⁰ Wire 83-84.

¹³¹ E.J. Bakker, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹³² Wallace Chafe, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: the Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹³³ E.J. Bakker, "Discourse and Performance: Involvement, Visualization and "Presence" in Homeric Poetry," *Classical Antiquity* (University of California Press) 12, no. 1 (April 1993): 1-29. 6-7

¹³⁴ Bakker, *Discourse*, 6. His observation in this case is regarding the English language.

Regarding the scholarly disregard for parataxis in translation, Sternberg suggests in frustration that the device serves very real purposes, ending by exclaiming: “How can one prevail on translators to leave the Bible’s art of parataxis alone?”¹³⁵ It appears that the opinions of Sternberg and the like are vindicated: at the very least, parataxis can demarcate oral speech.

Repetition

Another of Ong’s observations regarding psychodynamics of the preliterate is that thought is often redundant.¹³⁶ He points out that writing affords a reader the opportunity to review material repeatedly, a luxury which oral discourse cannot offer. “There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered... Redundancy, repetition of the just said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track.”¹³⁷

Mark has often been scrutinized for its pervasive redundancy. Perhaps the most well-known and focused study on repetition in Mark is Neirynck’s *Duality in Mark*, which identifies hundreds of instances of repetition in Mark, categorized under 30 subheadings. Even here, though, Neirynck is only

¹³⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). 525; his comment was aimed at the loss of meaning in 2 Sam 11 when parataxis is not translated with care.

¹³⁶ Ong 39-41

¹³⁷ Ong 39-40

focused on one overarching kind of repetition.¹³⁸ Wire's comments on Neiryndck are summative: "In his effort to determine an author's manner of writing, Neiryndck could be describing ways in which the spoken story has become shaped in the dual rhythms of its cultural tradition."¹³⁹

Discrete Units

Closely related to both paratactic arrangement and repetition is the idea that Mark is comprised to a large extent by discrete units.¹⁴⁰ The pericopae in Mark, though certainly thematically related, are self-contained and independently functional. They contribute to the flow of Mark not by adding depth to his illustrations, but rather by providing cumulative weight and repeated emphases. This illustrates the additive mode of oral thought on a macro level in Mark's gospel.

Narrative Commentary

Perhaps the most potentially insightful factor of orality regarding Mark is the presence of narrative commentary, an evident example of which is Mark 13:14. Here, Mark breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the

¹³⁸ Duality, or duplicate expressions, one immediately following the other.

¹³⁹ Wire 82.

¹⁴⁰ It is not being argued here that Mark, a literary maladroit, simply placed prepackaged units together, a view Dewey rightly criticizes (Joanna Dewey, "Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (April 1991): 221-236.) Rather it is in view that the pericopae in Mark can function independently, that they are overlapping, and that they are often redundant.

“reader” of his opus, stating ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω, “let the reader understand” as a parenthetical remark in the middle of a single thought.¹⁴¹

It is difficult to answer to whom exactly Mark is referring, but Fowler suggests “someone who is probably not in the mind of the author here is the modern image of a solitary, individual reader of the Gospel, reading silently in private.”¹⁴² Arguing that works such as Mark were often published by being read publically, and pointing out that the New Testament itself indicates the public reading of early Christian scripture,¹⁴³ Fowler suggests the possibility that “the Gospel of Mark was probably written to be read aloud to an assembled audience, and one possibility for identifying ‘the reader’ of 13:14 would be to take the parenthesis as a kind of wink or stage direction to an *anagnostes*, a professional reader reciting the Gospel of Mark before an assembled audience.”¹⁴⁴

If Fowler is correct here, and his interpretation is certainly plausible, then three conclusions follow: 1) Mark is here addressing someone who will be reading the composition aloud, indicating an oral intent for the gospel; 2) Mark’s gospel demonstrates self-awareness by addressing a person who will

¹⁴¹ Jesus’ words would read “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not be, then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains” were it not for the parenthetical “let the reader understand”, which is interjected between the two clauses.

¹⁴² R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). 83-84.

¹⁴³ Fowler refers to Col 4:16, 1 Thess 5:27, 1 Tim 4:13, and Rev 1:3

¹⁴⁴ Fowler 84

be reading it; 3) Mark's gospel is thus aware of its own oral purpose.

Although Fowler goes on to proffer other potential interpretations of the commentary found in 13:14, all of his suggestions yield the same conclusions.¹⁴⁵

Runge has classified this kind of commentary as "meta-commentary," roughly defining it as commentary within a discourse about the discourse itself that can be excised without altering the content.¹⁴⁶ Following his definition, a few other possible instances of meta-commentary become possible. Jesus' words in 4:23 εἰ τις ἔχει ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear," may not actually be Jesus' words at all, but rather narrative meta-commentary. Of course, if Mark were being read aloud, these words could serve as both the words of Jesus and as meta-commentary from the narrator simultaneously.

It is interesting to note that the same phrase is found at 7:16 in some major manuscripts (Codices A, D, and W) but not in most. Although the

¹⁴⁵ He ultimately offers 3 possible interpretations, the third with three sub-possibilities: "(1) An isolated, individual reader of Mark's Gospel, reading the Gospel aloud to himself in private; (2) an *anagnostes* reading the Gospel aloud to an assembly; or (3) an individual student of the Jewish Scriptures, who should be able to recognize and comprehend an allusion to Daniel and who could be (a) an isolated, individual reader of the Gospel; (b) an *anagnostes* reading the Gospel publicly; or (c) a member of the *anagnostes*' assembled audience." (85) All his suggestions involve Mark intentionally speaking to a person reading his opus, indicating a degree of self-awareness of both Mark's gospel and its orality.

¹⁴⁶ Steven Runge, *The Exegetical Significance of Meta-Comments for Identifying Key Propositions*, Article, Logos Bible Software (Providence: Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 2008).1-2

three major critical editions of the New Testament agree that the text at 7:16 is not original to Mark, this corroborates the ability of the phrase to be excised without altering the content of the text. Indeed, if the critical editions are correct, it suggests that this phrase truly has been used as narrative commentary by later scribes or tradents. Mark himself, however, may have meant 7:14 as narrative commentary (ἀκούσατέ μου πάντες καὶ σύνετε, “listen to me, all of you, and understand.”)

Summary of Internal Features

The survey of Mark’s gospel presented here has been brief, but it has yielded a few key observations. First, the arrangement and storyline of Mark is paratactic and additive, exactly what one would expect of an oral composition. This has been observed at the verse level via the pervasive use of the Greek conjunction καὶ and at a macro level via the discrete, self-contained pericopae. In addition, the abundant repetitions in Mark’s gospel serve the mnemonic purpose of aural reminders and enforcers for those who cannot turn the page back and re-read text ad hoc. Those unfamiliar with oral compositions and preliterate psychodynamics have found these very features perplexing. Finally and perhaps most helpfully, Mark leaves narrative meta-comments within his text. On some occasions these comments are for the

audience (e.g. 4:23, 7:14) and on one specific occasion it is for the narrator himself (13:14).

Cumulatively, Mark appears to have precisely those features which one would expect from a work intended for oral purposes, including features which seem odd to those habituated to chirographic compositions.

Composition

For some, the hypothesis of Mark's oral nature has been so compelling that they have suggested a process of its formulation that parallels the Homeric and Slavic epics: composition in tradition through performances of multiple tradents. According to this theory, however early Christians first started propagating stories about Jesus, a stream of tradition was shared among many. It was in the retelling of these stories that Mark took the shape in which it is found today. The Mark in our possession is just one iteration of many such potential tellings. Antoinette Clark Wire advocates this position most lucidly, having authored a monograph entirely dedicated to arguing this theory, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance*.

Intriguing as this theory is, one hesitates to accept it. One significant reason is, as mentioned before, Mark's composition is not at all in the same

genre as the epics of the Parry-Lord thesis. Mark is not metered poetry and it does not employ oral formulae.

Wire attempts to address this objection by suggesting that there are other modes of detecting oral speech than formulae¹⁴⁷ and that formulae cannot characterize all oral compositions.¹⁴⁸ Both of these statements are true, but they miss the thrust of the objection.

Oral speech is not the same as oral composition. An author can chirographically compose oral speech with all the trappings of orality. Indeed, that is precisely what a script is, even in modern times. The distinctive feature of the Parry-Lord hypothesis is that it isolated a feature of oral composition that does not usually exist in chirographic compositions of speech: transposable oral formulae. These served the purpose of providing the poet with a repository of phrases to properly accommodate metric restrictions extemporaneously. They serve no purpose in chirography. Thus, their existence is a strong indicator for oral composition.

Although Wire's suggestion that an oral register can be detected by other means is sound, it cannot be stated whether that oral register is the product of oral composition or the chirographic composition of a competent

¹⁴⁷ "Sheer quantity of formulaic language cannot demonstrate oral communication." Wire 73

¹⁴⁸ "These particular patterns do not provide a universal method for identifying orally composed literature." Wire 74

orator. Her suggestion that oral formulae cannot characterize all oral compositions is also sound, but that unfortunately means that we are left with no tool to identify those oral compositions that do not contain formulae.

Moreover, upon taking a step back from the thesis of composition in performance, another difficulty becomes apparent. Scholars who do not concede the oral composition of Mark do at least concede that he received oral tradition. It is entirely untenable to think that Mark crafted his gospel out of whole cloth. So the question is not a matter of whether Mark was affected by tradition, but rather how much.

Analogously, those who argue that Mark was composed in tradition concede that it was written at some point. It is entirely untenable to think that Mark was never written. So the question is not a matter of whether Mark wrote the gospel, but rather how much he shaped it while doing so.

Put another way, the real question is “in the process of writing his gospel, did Mark shape the tradition he received to such an extent that it can be attributed specifically to him?” This more nuanced question involves shades of gray that can hardly be ascertained with any degree of clarity or consensus. What exactly does it mean to “shape” the tradition, and how can one determine the extent to which Mark shaped it? Exactly what line would have to be crossed for the gospel be “attributed to Mark?” Crafting a solution

to these riddles would be a Herculean task that Homer himself could not achieve, even given hundreds of years.

Codification

After the composition and proliferation of Mark's gospel, one of its most lasting functions was forming the foundation of the other two Synoptics. Apart from three pericopae, almost all of Mark is subsumed by the other two Synoptics.¹⁴⁹ Although it cannot be demonstrated, it is plausible that Mark was causative. It could be that, upon becoming familiar with Mark, Matthew considered it necessary to fill in some gaps. The same could be said of Luke's reading of Mark. Indeed, that both Matthew and Luke read Mark and decided to write their own versions bolsters this suggestion.

In addition, given their extensive use of Mark, it is plausible that the material in Mark was achieving a kind of canonicity. At the very least, both Matthew and Luke considered the material in Mark worthy of propagation, but perhaps it was so vital that they would lose legitimacy if they diverged from it too greatly.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ The three are the healing of a deaf mute (7:33-36), the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26), and the man running away naked (14:51-52); Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). 59-61

¹⁵⁰ One could argue here that John did not lose legitimacy, and it diverges significantly from Matthew. It is important to note that we cannot be sure that John

Supposing that these theories are accurate, they would lend a measure of additional credence to the oral intent of Mark. The oral modality of Mark's gospel would fit this model better than a chirographic modality. Mark, crafted for purposes of oral speech, quickly became widespread among the illiterate populous. As the story became well-known and canonical, the constraints imposed upon it by its modality spurred others to fill in the gaps. Matthew and Luke, both clearly literate and inclined towards more discursive compositions than Mark, responded to the community need for more precise and comprehensive teachings than Mark could provide.

In other words, the data would be less understandable were Mark primarily intended for reception by a written modality. Mark ought not to have been sufficiently disparate from Matthew and Luke to have evoked a communal need for more precise and detailed accounts of Jesus life.

The interplay of the oral nature of Mark and the Synoptic Problem will be revisited shortly, in the light of lessons learned from the Qur'an.

and those in his region knew Mark. We can be sure, however, that Matthew and Luke both knew Mark, and we can infer that others in their locales knew it as well.

Assessment

Script Thesis

Given the internal features of Mark, it appears that Mark was designed primarily for oral purposes, to be recited aloud. There is insufficient evidence to conclude it was composed in oral performance; the arguments for an entirely oral-traditional provenance of Mark are not compelling. They do sufficiently argue for an oral register of Mark, but the crucial elements for composition in orality are quite absent. In addition, the self-aware orality found in Mark 13:14 suggests that the gospel was intentionally crafted as a script, not simply a byproduct of tradition.

This makes sense in light of the Synoptic problem. Mark was the orally propagated primer that laid the foundation for, and perhaps produced the demand for, more precise and discursive accounts of Jesus' life. It was the first writing dedicated to propounding the life story of Jesus, and as such it was designed to be accessible, not comprehensive.

This theory also makes sense of the manuscript evidence. The manuscripts of Mark have proportionally more variants than the other Synoptics.¹⁵¹ It is often suggested that this may be on account of the lack of its use once Matthew and Luke produced their works, and this suggestion is

¹⁵¹ Wire 31

sound.¹⁵² However, an additional reason may be that variation in Mark was more natural to its modality, since it was primarily envisioned for oral purposes, and verbatim reproduction of the script may not have been the intent.

The Script Thesis and Mark's Bookends

The notion that Mark was intended as a script also makes sense of the controversial beginning and ending of the Gospel. It has been considered uncertain whether Mark 1:1 is original to the text in part or in whole.¹⁵³ Similarly, the ending of Mark has also been debated, though far more vigorously.¹⁵⁴

It is quite possible that 1:1 was original to Mark, but was understood as a brief introduction to the script that was often amended to suit the occasion. Of course, a priori, the converse is also an option: the original script may have begun with 1:2, and 1:1 was added as an introduction to the script that gradually became canonical.

The data is more conclusive concerning the ending of Mark, though there is ongoing debate. For the most part, text critics have reached the

¹⁵² Daniel Wallace, "Can We Trust the Text of the New Testament," *A Debate between Daniel B. Wallace & Bart D. Ehrman* (Dallas: Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, October 1, 2011). See also Wire 32.

¹⁵³ J.K. Elliott, "Mark 1.1-3: A Later Addition to the Gospel?," *New Testament Studies* 46, no. 4 (2000): 584-588.

¹⁵⁴ Wire 33

consensus that the original ending of Mark occurs at 16:8. The script thesis makes good sense of the multiple endings here as well. If Mark left the ending abrupt, then whenever a public performer of Mark's gospel abruptly ended at 16:8, the audience must have demanded an ending. Perhaps the longer ending (16:9-20) was the one that gradually became the accepted filler. It has been noted that it appears to be a conflation of Matthew's and Luke's writings, and this seems an appropriate and natural source for a longer ending of Mark's story after the advent of the other Synoptics.

As to why Mark left his ending abrupt and how it was filled in during the interim between Mark and the other Synoptics, one can only speculate. If the script thesis bears the weight of scrutiny, though, it seems most likely that the ending of Mark was designed precisely to evoke a reaction at the end of 16:8, namely the emotional demand from the audience: "What happened next?!" The open ending would, in this case, allow the performer of Mark the freedom to insert his own ending, or the ending relayed to him by another tradent, regarding the risen Jesus.

In other words, if Mark wrote his gospel as a script, the abrupt ending would virtually require the storyteller to give an account of the risen Jesus,

either his own or the one he heard from someone else. Indeed it appears that there were at least 500 such people at a very early point in Christian history.¹⁵⁵

It is pertinent to note here that alternate modalities of Mark's composition make less sense of the data. Had Mark been composed in tradition, why would there not be an ending? It is difficult to envision a performer abruptly stopping at 16:8; however, if one continued, and it is almost certain that one would have, why so much variation in the records when there is no such variation before this point in the story? The one who argues for Mark's composition in oral tradition is left with the task of explaining 1) the great variation after 16:8; 2) the relatively great stability of everything before 16:8; 3) the variation of the latter in light of the stability of the former; and 4) the reason for the break in stability occurring precisely here.

A written modality of Mark yields the same conundrum, though there is a potential solution: perhaps the original ending was lost. This appears to be the solution of some, though a convincing reason for the missing ending has not been proffered. The suggestion that the final page was lost is not likely considering the probability that the earliest copies of Mark were probably

¹⁵⁵ Dunn states: "This tradition, we can be entirely confident, was *formulated as tradition within months of Jesus' death*." (J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003) 855, emphasis his. O'Collins has stated that the virtually unanimous conclusion of scholarship is that this formula is no later than 40 AD (Gerald O'Collins, *What Are They Saying about the Resurrection?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

scrolls. The idea that the ending was somehow damaged is also not plausible considering the fact that the ending of a scroll is the most protected part of the scroll. Plus, if the ending of Mark were lost so early on in its history that other copies had not been made, Mark probably would have been around to recreate the ending.

Although all these theories are highly speculative, the script theory provides the most coherent and cogent account for variability found in Markan manuscripts both at the beginning of the text and at the end. That Mark also appears to be a script on account of its internal characteristics bolsters this suggestion.

Mutual Elucidation

After surveying the contexts, internal features, compositions, and codifications of Mark and the Qur'an, it is safe to conclude that both texts were designed primarily for oral proclamation. Additionally, there are some literary and historical parallels between the two texts, a platform for mutual elucidation.

Regarding literary parallels, both Mark and the Qur'an were written for proclamation through an oral register. Some of the oral qualities they have in common are redundancy, composition in discrete units, pithy and

mnemonically crafted accounts, paratactic arrangement, and additive argumentation.

Historically speaking, both texts underwent peculiarly similar courses of appropriation. At some point between initial composition and codification in the form we have today, discrepant introductions and conclusions of both Mark and the Qur'an can be found in their records. In addition, both Mark and the Qur'an were subsumed and elaborated by ensuing tradition. These traditions, in turn, neared or achieved scriptural status themselves.

It may be that the historical parallels are a result of the literary parallels. Perhaps the process of codifying and communally appropriating a text intended for oral proclamation results in the historical phenomena paralleled between Mark and the Qur'an. This proposition constitutes the final aspect of this treatise. As an introductory survey for comparative work in this field, the results of this treatment are preliminary. The ensuing models are proffered as suggestions and a basis for future investigation.

The Discrepant Bookends of Mark and the Qur'an

When in pursuit of the original form of Mark 1:1, the manuscript evidence is inconclusive.¹⁵⁶ The great majority of important manuscripts contain the fullest form of 1:1 ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ,¹⁵⁷ “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” A few very important manuscripts and many early references to the beginning of Mark stop before the title “the son of God.” At least one manuscript omits the verse entirely.¹⁵⁸ Given the script thesis, it appears that this introductory verse might have been used as malleable text that could be imported to suit a specific occasion.

Whether the Christological titles were added or removed from the original text is not in view; rather, the important fact to note is that the oral intent of the script allowed for variability. It appears that when early Christians began conceiving of the Markan text in a primarily written mode,

¹⁵⁶ Elliott states that there are “two main text-critical problems: (1) there is a choice between a longer and a shorter reading in v.1, and (2) the MSS are divided between *en to Esaia* and *en tois prophetais* in v.2.” Regarding the former, he continues “The title *Iesou Christou* occurs in Mark’s Gospel only in 1.1. Mark commonly uses the name *ho Iesous* and he occasionally uses *Christos* where it still has a function as a title. In Mark 1.1 the two names seem to read merely as an extended proper name, which may explain the later additions found in various MSS to provide an appropriate epithet – additions probably influenced by liturgical usage.” Elliott 584

¹⁵⁷ By fullest form, the English rendering is in mind. Some manuscripts include τοῦ immediately before θεοῦ, but the English remains the same.

¹⁵⁸ Manuscript 28, an 11th century miniscule

the manuscript evidence stabilized. Thus it became a solid text with a record of variability.

The same phenomenon has been noted with Surah al-Fatiha in the Qur'an. One of Muhammad's closest and earliest companions, Ibn Mas'ud, did not consider the first chapter of today's Qur'an canonical.¹⁵⁹ He considered it traditional revelation from Allah, but not for the purpose of recitation as Qur'an. The manuscript evidence is also similar to Mark; of the 34 manuscripts that have a suggested provenance in the first century AH, only one has the whole surah¹⁶⁰ and only one other has any portion of it.¹⁶¹ Although many of these manuscripts are fragmentary and only about 83% of the Qur'an can be found among all of them, the conspicuous absence of a chapter with the liturgical importance of Fatiha serves as a degree of textual corroboration for Ibn Masud's objection.¹⁶² In later manuscripts, though, Fatiha is unequivocally canonical. When assessing Fatiha in the whole Qur'anic tradition, then, it is a solid text with a record of variability.

One plausible explanation for this parallel is that these introductory texts served as traditional introductions for both works. Mark 1:1

¹⁵⁹ Fatiha is absent in all the records of Ibn Masud's canon (Ibn Abi Daud, As-Suyuti, and ibn Nadim).

¹⁶⁰ DAM 20-33.1

¹⁶¹ DAM 01-25.1

¹⁶² F. Déroche and S. N. Nosedá (Eds.), *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique. I. Les manuscrits de style hijazi*. Volume 2. Tome I. Le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library, 2001, Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedá, Leda, and British Library: London, p. xxvii.

encapsulates two of the three main Christological titles presented by Mark, and exactly those two which were of more interest to the early church (i.e. “Christ” and “Son of God,” as opposed to “Son of Man”). It would be the kind of introduction that tradents or scribes might have crafted to introduce the gospel they were presenting, especially in light of the more solid introductions of the other Synoptics. Regarding the Qur’an, tradition states that the Fatiha was recited as an introduction to the Qur’an in salaah. It, too, has been noted to encapsulate the theology of the Qur’an. It may have provided a perfect, ready-made introduction to the Qur’an that was gradually assimilated into the text.

If these texts were both primarily intended for oral proclamation, the transition to a written modality may itself have been the trigger for adding traditional material for introductory purposes. Put in general terms, if an oral text does not have a well-demarcated introduction, the act of writing those texts for posterity would incline scribes to write an introduction, either as margin note or as a replication of tradition material that had been used orally. Over time, this text would be seen as canonical. The conversion of textual perception, from an oral text to a written text, would probably be early, shortly after the text gains recognition as scriptural. This would yield a solid text with a record of variability, exactly as we find in Mark and the Qur’an.

The same phenomenon can apply to the conclusions. If there were no well-demarcated conclusion to an oral text, one may have been provided by scribes as it was being written. This does not impugn the scribes' motives in the least; such an undertaking would simply be a mimicking of the process undertaken by oral tradents, however their decisions would have lasting repercussions.

Mark's multiple endings are an example of these repercussions, and the Quran's endings are no different. Per Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, the Qur'an ought to have ended after Surah 112 (al-Ikhlās). Per Zaid ibn Thabit, the Qur'an ought to end after Surat 114 (al-Nas). Per Ubay ibn Ka'ab and Abu Musa, the Qur'an ought to end after Surat 116 (al-Khal). These multiple endings are analogous to Mark's.

Put in general terms, if an oral text does not have a well-demarcated conclusion, the act of writing those texts for posterity would incline scribes to write a conclusion, either as margin note or as a replication of tradition material that had been used orally. Over time, this text would be seen as canonical.

The Synoptic Gospels and Hadith Literature

The oral modality, which makes a text ideal for initial tradition propagation, comes with the necessary restraint of imprecision and simplicity.

After the oral text has reached a canonical status, a community would probably begin to explore more details. This theory has already been visited regarding the Synoptics, and it seems that the Qur'an underwent an analogous process.

The hadith collections are an expansive body of literature that elaborate on the life of Muhammad by providing accounts of his sayings and actions. A great number of these hadith are in some way related to teachings of the Qur'an.¹⁶³ The hadith seem to parallel Matthew and Luke in that they provide details regarding texts that were, at the very least, in the beginning stages of canonization.

It may be that Mark and the Qur'an, given their level of precision and detail as oral texts, triggered the production of further commentary. If we accept the consensus dating of Matthew and Luke, then commentary regarding Mark was produced within a couple a decades. These were written commentaries, so they were detailed and more comprehensive, satiating the desire of the early church.

Regarding the hadith, there were still some centuries remaining in Arab society before written texts would receive primary authority over oral

¹⁶³ *Asbab an-nuzool* are not the only ahadith in mind here, since these are hadith that comment particularly on specific verses and occasions of revelation. Rather, a broader idea is being envisioned. For example, salaah is mentioned in the Qur'an, but the hadith provide the comments. Most of the hadith regarding salaah are not *asbab an-nuzool*.

texts. Thus for centuries, commentary on the Qur'an proliferated vibrantly in oral tradition. When Muslims in the classical era received written collections as authoritative, the production of commentaries came to a halt.

Regarding the canonicity of these commentaries, the canon of the New Testament was still open when Matthew and Luke were written. Given that the tradition relayed by Mark was the stuff that was sacred, not just Mark per se, Matthew and Luke may have been seen as sacred because they assimilated the Markan text. That the early church accorded the same level of canonicity to these texts serves as evidence. In the case of the Qur'an, the canon closed with Muhammad's death, and the hadith could never officially be elevated to the same level. Functionally, though, hadith are often treated canonically.¹⁶⁴

To summarize this position in general terms, though text that is designed for oral proclamation is excellent for propagating tradition, it does not afford the depth and breadth of tradition that would satisfy a burgeoning community indefinitely. Commentaries will arise. The degree to which these commentaries reproduce the text may be a marker for the canonicity of these commentaries.

¹⁶⁴ The traditional example of this phenomenon is that category of hadith that functionally abrogates the Qur'an. These are called *naskh al-hukm*, the abrogation of Quranic commands but not the text. In this category of abrogation, the ahadith are functionally overruling Quranic commands.

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